

Stress and Substance Use Disorders in Families

All families face challenges at some point. Common troubles include illness, death in the family, marital strain, financial problems, internal conflicts, and emotional or physical abuse.¹ These obstacles create stress that can contribute to increased alcohol and/or drug use. In addition, many families encounter problems at work or school that reverberate at home, compounding the problem.

To draw attention to this issue, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, celebrates **National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month (Recovery Month)** every September. **Recovery Month** celebrates individuals and families in long-term recovery and acknowledges those who provide recovery services. This year's theme, **"Join the Voices for Recovery: Now More Than Ever!"**, underscores how stress in our society may contribute to or exacerbate alcohol and/or drug use, which can contribute to substance use disorders or relapse. This document discusses the prevalence and causes of substance use disorders among families, the effects of stress and substance use disorders on each family member, the benefits of recovery, and the variety of treatment and recovery options available for families across the country.

Prevalence and Causes of Substance Use Disorders Among Families

Substance use disorders affect families of every race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and location. In 2008, an estimated 23.1 million people needed treatment for a substance use disorder within the past year in the United States.² These disorders affect not just one person, but also the person's entire family and close friends.

Alcohol and/or drug addiction is often a perpetual cycle among families.³ Children of parents who suffer from alcohol or drug addiction are four times more likely to develop a substance use disorder than those who weren't raised in that environment.⁴ **Also, 1 in 4 children under age 18 live in a home where alcohol misuse or alcohol addiction is hurting the family. Many thousands more live with parental drug abuse.**⁵

Stress contributes to the use of alcohol and/or drugs. Chronic emotional stress also can be caused by the addiction of a family member, creating often serious health and developmental consequences for children.⁶ Stress may also cause some people to relapse or turn to substance use for the first time as a way to cope.⁷ Individuals face a variety of stressful situations that impact the entire family, including:

- **Youth stress** — As children transition from their youth to adolescent years, they may misuse alcohol and prescription drugs as a response to stresses at school and at home.^{8,9} A SAMHSA study that connects violent behavior to substance use found that girls between 12 and 17 who were in serious fights were more likely to have used alcohol and/or drugs. As described in it's **10 Strategic Initiatives**, SAMHSA is working to reduce the behavioral health impacts of violence and trauma among youth.

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- **Financial problems** – For families, not having enough money for necessities or neglecting to pay bills causes significant stress, which may contribute to increased alcohol and/or drug use.¹⁰ Another one of SAMHSA's 10 Strategic Initiatives is to reduce the barriers that homeless individuals and families experience when accessing programs that sustain recovery.
- **Marital problems** – Tensions between married adults cause stress within the whole family and play a role in substance use disorders. In fact, in families with a member who suffers from addiction, divorce is seven times more likely.¹¹
- **Health problems** – Health issues such as eating disorders, cancer, or chronic diseases are stressful on individuals and their family members and are also the result of growing up in the chronic emotional stress of addiction in the family.^{12, 13} People may develop substance use disorders as they cope with these stressful problems. For example, substance use disorders have been reported in up to 55 percent of people with bulimia and 23 percent of people with anorexia.¹⁴ **In addition, among adults over age 18 with serious mental illness, 25.2 percent, or 2.5 million people, were dependent on alcohol or illicit drugs in 2008.**¹⁵
- **Emotional abuse or violence** – Abuse or violence within a family causes stress, and often contributes to alcohol and/or drug use either at the time of abuse, or later in an individual's life. **Additionally, more than 50 percent of spousal and child abuse stems from alcohol and/or drug use.**¹⁶

Effects of Substance Use Disorders on the Family and the Benefits of Recovery

The stress of substance use disorders can have physical, emotional, social, and spiritual consequences on individuals and their families. Specifically, a parental substance use disorder greatly affects his or her children. Children who grow up in this environment experience feelings of guilt, shame, anger, or isolation throughout their lives.¹⁷ Additionally, parents with a family history of addiction may have trouble establishing healthy and productive habits within their own families.¹⁸

If highly stressful family situations persist, they can have an adverse impact on a child's development and dangerous health consequences for the family and friends of the person with the substance use disorder.¹⁹ This emotional stress can affect their mood, appetite, and sleep cycles. In addition, it may ultimately lead family members to develop chronic anxiety, depression, or their own addiction.²⁰

In these situations, parents and children are encouraged to seek help. Call SAMHSA's National Helpline at **1-800-662-HELP**, or 1-800-487-4889 (TDD), for 24-hour free and confidential information and treatment referrals in English and Spanish, or visit SAMHSA's "Find Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment" Web site at <http://www.samhsa.gov/treatment>. Use the *Psychology Today* Web site and the National Board for Certified Counselors Web site to help find a certified counselor in your area. Children and youth can consult a school social worker or student assistance counselor who is trained to provide support to young people living with addiction in the family. Creating communities that focus on the prevention of mental illness and substance abuse for children, youth, families, and other community members is another of SAMHSA's 10 Strategic Initiatives.

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Fortunately, after treatment, individuals recognize that addiction is a chronic brain illness and they develop healthy coping skills to more effectively deal with stress.²¹ Seek help for your entire family if one person suffers from a substance use disorder, so that everyone can heal. Family therapy helps those affected by a loved one's addiction identify and resolve their problems. Through education and guidance, participants learn they can't control their loved one's addiction, but they can take accountability for their own health.²²

Family-oriented treatment programs and support groups are widely available and effective. In two surveys of individuals who participated in family treatment programs:

- **82 percent** reported much improved mental health and well-being.²³
- **73 percent** reported a greater ability to function at home, school, or work.²⁴
- **68 percent** of women who stayed in comprehensive treatment longer than 3 months were able to remain alcohol and drug free, compared with 48 percent who left treatment within the first 3 months and did not remain alcohol and drug free.²⁵

In addition to treating the addiction, family therapy helps confront other stressful issues within the family, such as youth stress, marital problems, and health problems.²⁶



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My problem was not any specific substance—it was the disease of addiction. I began using at the young age of 11 to escape the pain of long-term abuse. My life was painful; addiction and violence were rampant in my family. But today I am so grateful to have been given the gift of recovery. I have not used any mind- or mood-altering chemicals for the past 24 years.

I was in and out of treatment centers for several years before I came into contact with others who were “just like me” and was finally able to hear the message of recovery. I began attending 12-step groups and have never looked back. Recovery for me means that I have a life that was not even imagined while I was using. The cycle of addiction in my family has been broken. What this means is that my children, ages 18 and 11, have never known me as a mom with a substance use disorder. They know me as a loving, caring, and compassionate person.

I have had so many wonderful experiences on this journey and I could not possibly mention them all. I will say that I have obtained my master's in social work and have worked in this field for many years. I am involved in the community and take the responsibility to relay the message of recovery to individuals suffering from substance use disorders very seriously. I am a homeowner, have traveled, and have done many other things that I couldn't have done if I wasn't in recovery. However, the most important gifts to me are the internal ones: my self esteem, self worth, integrity, self respect, and acceptance of self. This was unimaginable in my “other life.”

Stress Relief Tips for Family Members

- Exercise regularly
- Learn to delegate responsibilities
- Allot extra time in your schedule
- Take periodic breaks
- Point out the positives

SOURCE: “Stress and Anxiety.” *The New York Times Health Guide*: <http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/symptoms/stress-and-anxiety/treatment.html>. Accessed August 10, 2009.

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How to Get Help for Yourself, Your Family, and Others

A variety of options are available to help facilitate recovery. An abundant amount of information and resources exists on the **Recovery Month** Web site at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>, including the “*The Social Services System: Supporting Treatment and Recovery for Individuals and Families*” television and radio program. This program examines ways in which social services effectively deliver assistance to those in need, including children and families with substance use disorders.

Family members and friends can find supplementary treatment and recovery information through the following resources:

- **SAMHSA's National Helpline** – Provides 24-hour free and confidential information and treatment referrals in English and Spanish by calling **1-800-662-HELP**, or 1-800-487-4889 (TDD).
- **SAMHSA's “Find Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment” Web site** – Contains resources about mental health, substance abuse, and treatment.
- **Mental Health America** – Dedicated to preventing mental and substance use conditions through advocacy, education, research, and service.
- **Al-Anon/Alateen Family Groups** – Provides support groups for families and friends of people with alcohol problems.
- **Nar-Anon** – Provides a community for family members to share experiences related to substance use disorders.
- **National Association for Children of Alcoholics** – Provides information and educational materials for children and families of people with alcohol or drug problems, as well as for treatment professionals.
- **Adult Children of Alcoholics** – Offers a 12-step program for women and men who grew up in alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional homes.
- **Alliance for Children and Families** – Provides services to the nonprofit child and family sectors, and economic empowerment organizations.
- **National Asian Pacific American Families Against Substance Abuse, Inc.** – Involves service providers, families, and youth to promote health and social justice and address the alcohol, tobacco, and other drug issues of Asian and Pacific Islander populations.

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- **National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators** – Represents administrators of State and local public child welfare agencies, bringing an informed view of the problems facing families today to the formulation of child welfare policy.
- **Teen Challenge International** – Provides youth, adults, and families with effective and comprehensive faith-based solutions to life-controlling alcohol and drug problems.
- **White Bison** – Conducts education, training, and development focused on Native American recovery communities on reservations and in urban areas.

If you have lived through your own or a loved one's addiction and have worked through recovery, help educate others about the risks of substance use disorders and the benefits of treatment and recovery. Throughout the year and this September during **Recovery Month**, join thousands of families across the Nation to celebrate those in recovery and endorse treatment for those in need by:

- **Finding** ways to lighten the mood when times are stressful. For example, go for a walk or bike ride, or schedule a family game night to spend quality time with your family.
- **Sharing** your personal experience with friends, extended family, colleagues, and the community. Explain how stress can take a heavy toll on the family, but those suffering from addiction can recover and lead productive lives.
- **Working** with a local organization to plan a **Recovery Month** event at your office, in your community, or in your school. Use the event to celebrate people in recovery and educate others about how to get help.

For more information and organizations that can help provide treatment and other resources nationally or in your area, call 1-800-662-HELP or 1-800-487-4889 (TDD), or visit <http://www.samhsa.gov/treatment>. For additional *Recovery Month* materials, visit <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>.

Inclusion of Web sites and other resources mentioned in this document and on the *Recovery Month* Web site does not constitute official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

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